

Guido: Stereotype, Caricature, or Lifestyle?

Chiara and Franco Montalto (January 16, 2010)



What is this guido thing? Is it pure caricature put on us by the outside world, or do we have an active part in it? Is it lifestyle or demeaning stereotype? A (former guido) brother who now teaches environmental engineering, and a (longtime anti-guido) sister who is now an actress, writer and filmmaker, look back.

I am the anti-guido. I've never had big hair and am very proud of that. My older brother, and everyone around me, it seemed at the time, was. I wanted nothing to do with the world of Z. Cavaricci's, gold chains, big hair for girls and overly styled and gelled hair for guys, and loud, cheesy, obnoxious dance music. An introverted, and overly sensitive kid, I was interested in and pained by apartheid in South Africa and other problems in far away places at the age of ten, and these things seemed to me to be a universe away from the loud music my brother blasted from his room, and the dance clubs he frequented on the weekends. I escaped into a private world of books artists, and music by the Cure, U2 and eventually Nirvana, what I considered the ultimate anti-guido band.



Neither my brother nor I turned out half bad. He went on to go to Cooper Union, become a Fulbright scholar, and, ultimately got his PhD in environmental engineering from Cornell. Now, he is a professor of environmental engineering at Drexel University, and with his black, Barbados-born, Brooklyn-raised wife, Sharon, has two kids, Simona and Nicolo'. I am an actress, writer and filmmaker and work as a paralegal to make ends meet.

When we reflect back on our adolescence, my brother says he feels no shame. He views his "guido years" as a stylistically expressed cultural choice that helped him feel like he belonged somewhere during the always difficult teenage years. My brother looks back on his guido years with fondness and nostalgia. It was a phase that helped him to develop self-respect, an independent and bold spirit, and, importantly, compassion for others who are portrayed in an unflattering way by the mainstream. Somewhere, I know he's still got that purple Cavaricci suit that made him look like a gigantic grape.

Which is why, twenty years later, I'm surprised to find myself writing about the latest guido-centered phenomenon—MTV's "Jersey Shore". In case you are one of the few who has missed it, "Jersey Shore" is MTV's latest ridiculously popular reality show. Let's face it, this is reality television, folks. It's the car accident and we're all rubbernecking. Personally, I don't look to this stuff for its artistic merit. It is television product that's created to do one thing: get maximum exposure and publicity with a minimum of cost. At that, MTV has succeeded, greatly. Are there messed up, offensive images in this and other shows? Yes, no question.

Are there stereotypical images of Italian-Americans in mainstream media? Absolutely. As a professional actress, I'm rarely called in for non-stereotypical Italian-American roles. I hear it all the time, "you are very specific looking," whatever that means. Maybe if there wasn't an audience eager to gobble this stuff up like candy, to rubberneck at the aforementioned car accident, we'd all be a little further on down the road.

I asked my brother recently to define the word "guido." He told me it wasn't a term that he and his friends used. He felt it was coined by the mainstream to describe a group of people who sought to distinguish themselves in a distinct way, because they actually felt different, yet also felt they could not express their otherness freely in public, without enduring some kind of ridicule. What he was is not what they thought he was.

Further, he feels some of the "guidos" were in fact, different: their parents and grandparents spoke or had knowledge of other languages, were dark in complexion, may not have been educated, had names that were hard to pronounce, considered family and close friends as the only people who could really be trusted, lived in houses full of bleeding-heart crucifixes, plastic fruit, glasses of wine at dinner, and other objects used to express pride of economic successes in the new country. The awareness of the presence of some of these things in his life, and the associated awareness of their lacking in the lives of some of his peers significantly affected his adolescent quest to define his own personal identity. In a pluralistic society, these kinds of reaction are normal. In college, I read Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, in which he essentially makes the same point, though his analysis is of Rastafarians and punks. I'd suggest that book be read by those with a strong opinion on this matter.



Several years ago, I studied with Dr. Joe Sciorra, of the John D. Calandra Institute, when he taught a class on the Everyday Performance of Italian-Americans. It was at the height of the Sopranos controversy, and I had been, up until that point, pretty anti-Sopranos. (I also didn't have HBO, but that was another matter.) In class, we analyzed the Columbus Day episode of the Sopranos and I discovered that it was the only show on TV trying to capture the various levels of dispute and discord within the Italian American community about Columbus Day. That class totally changed the way I looked at things.

The Calandra Institute will be holding a colloquium on January 21st to look at the guido culture. Is the "guido" simply a stereotype, or is there more there, lurking under the surface? Scholars, writers, academics, professors, folklorists, are looking, studying, discussing, as they should be.

So here we are, opening up this idea for discussion. What is this guido thing? Is it pure caricature put on us by the outside world, or do we have an active part in it? Is it lifestyle or demeaning stereotype? If in fact it is a subculture as defined by Hebdige, then what does that mean of Italian-Americans current place in modern American society? The Calandra Institute and its symposium offer a place to start this discussion. I'm no expert and certainly not an academic, but I know that by opening up this dialogue in this forum, we are taking the first step towards moving forward, transcending stereotypes and defining our own place in American society.

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